

“In Memoriam”
Sermon for the First Sunday after Pentecost
Trinity Sunday and Memorial Day
May 30, 2010 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

Today is Memorial Day. It was established in 1868 as a day to honor the fallen soldiers of the Civil War. Over time Memorial Day has become a time of solemn recognition of all of the nation’s war dead and the high price of our freedoms. As one writer offers about Memorial Day, “There is the sense in which the dead, though silent, still speak – the quality and character of their lives lingering long after they have gone.”

Have we lost the meaning of this day? Has it morphed into simply another holiday with a day off from work? For many it simply signifies the beginning of summer – a time to pull out the grill, put the boat in the water, get together as a family for hotdogs and hamburgers, head to the beach or to the mountains, wear a bit of the red, white and blue.

And yet here in Lancaster County in our community we are reminded of the real reason for Memorial Day when we pass a cemetery and catch the sight of flags, small ones, fluttering at headstones, at grave markers, here and there.

I have seen the movie *Saving Private Ryan* many times. It is a powerful movie highlighting both the tragedies and the heroics of the European theater in World War Two. A family of brothers is serving in the war. In a tragically short time in the several days around “D day” all but one of the brothers are killed in combat. A mother has lost all of her sons, save one – young Private Ryan. It is an event in the life of one family that sparks remembrance of a letter Abraham Lincoln wrote to another mother in the 1860’s who had lost all of her sons in that civil conflict. It was a letter about sacrifice for the good of a larger cause.

It is decided that Private Ryan must be found, must be removed from being “in harm’s way” and must be sent home. A captain and a small squad of soldiers who have just survived the horrors of the Allied invasion, are ordered to find Private Ryan. The movie is the story of that journey.

One by one members of the squad are killed by enemy fire. Ultimately, the captain and a couple of the original band of brothers find the young Private Ryan, but there is one more fight to save a bridge from falling into enemy hands before Private Ryan can be sent home, mission accomplished.

At the end of the movie the captain lies dying on the bridge, in the midst of shellfire and explosions, as American troops are arriving to rescue those remaining. The captain, who is losing his life and who has lost most of his squad to find and rescue this one young man, says to Private Ryan: “Make this count.” He asks the private in so many words to live his life in a way that gives meaning to the suffering and the loss, to live a life that justifies the sacrifice.

In that moment I felt the power of the story – a sense that the Captain’s words were not simply meant for Private Ryan, but for all of us that have come after that time. That the message was really to all of us today: to live a life as individuals and as a nation that gives meaning to the

immense suffering and sacrifice by others to assure our freedom and the continuation of the principles upon which this nation was founded.

In the final scene, an elderly, white-haired Private Ryan brings his wife and family to a single gravesite, to stand before a single cross in a field covered with crosses and stars of David. The name etched on the cross is that of the Captain. Standing there, Ryan turns to his wife and with tears in his eyes asks her, "Have I been a good man?" She looks surprised. "Tell me," he says, "please tell me I have been a good man." His tears and question coming out of a deep understanding of the sacrifice and suffering that made it possible for him to live.

Today, we do not honor war and conflict. We honor those who have been willing to serve in the midst of the chaos and conflict that war can inflict. We honor those now doing so in places all around the world. We honor those who have suffered, those who have given up their lives for others, those who have offered up their lives in the cause of bringing an ordered, safe and free way of life out of the chaos of conflict. We honor, today, those who risk their all to assure freedom and to bring about peace.

No one commemorates the day war starts. We commemorate the day war ends. Today, we honor those who have placed themselves "in harm's way" that war may be avoided, that conflicts that have started may end and that freedom and peace may prevail.

Preacher's Note: The words of the captain and of Ryan are quoted, as best as I can remember, from what they said in the movie.